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ABSTRACT

This paper presents numerous suggestions and guidelines for the school administrator who is just beginning a career as a superintendent of schools. The author offers recommendations dealing with a wide range of topics relevant to the novice superintendent, including self-analysis and evaluating job opportunities, getting acquainted with a new school district, dealing with the school board, preparing for the first school board meeting, dealing with professional associates, dealing with the public, and dealing with students. (JG)

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Hints to the Beginning Superintendent of Schools

The business of being a superintendent of schools is a complicated and serious matter. When the job is underestimated and the individual is overestimated, calamity almost inevitably follows, both for the superintendent and the school system. The prospective superintendent therefore has a deep obligation to make a careful appraisal of both his personal competence and the demands of the particular job. If he finds himself wanting for the performance of the task, wisdom will dictate either that he not apply for the job or that he will decline if offered the job.

To be or not to be a superintendent, to accept a position that is open and offered or to wait for another where chances for successful leadership and satisfying professional experience are better--these are decisions that every school superintendent must make one or more times in his professional career. The step from the classrooms and lecture halls of a university campus to the key position of responsibility in a community school system is a big one; the step to the school superintendency from a principalship, some other administrative position, or a specialized professional role is also a serious and challenging move. Furthermore, the step from the superintendency of one school system to that of another, even by a veteran in the field of school administration, is a move that cannot be made lightly.

SELF-ANALYSIS AND JOB ANALYSIS

Not content with an appraisal of his professional background, the would-be superintendent should look at his personal characteristics. Not everyone who is professionally qualified and intellectually able possesses the emotional and physical qualities to cope with the task of being a superintendent of schools. Inevitably, the superintendent who is successful devoted, and insistent on getting adequate resources and facilities for all children in the district will have critics and even enemies. The thin-skinned individual or one who does not possess deep devotion and courage should turn his attention to endeavors other than being a superintendent of schools. The man or woman who cannot take a position and stand by it when popular opinion is against him, or who is deeply wounded by harsh criticism, should not accept a school superintendency.

The prospective superintendent should also check his philosophy and his values to determine whether his concepts of life and living are consistent with the traditions and broad goals of the public schools he will serve.

Often overlooked but of considerable importance are the mores and character of the community. He should analyze and compare them with his own heritage, family and educational background. A scholarly candidate from a particular community may find that his speech, manner of dress,

EA 006 921

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and social customs brand him as a "foreigner" in another community. His leadership may be unacceptable to many people in a community with mores, standards, social customs and academic or educational beliefs contrary to those of the community in which he was sired and educated. If the individual finds that he can be identified readily as one without many of the qualities expected of a leader and scholar in given community, it is the better part of wisdom to seek a position elsewhere.

Once he has completed his personal appraisal as related to the job and the community, wisdom would suggest that he get further information. Some communities become shattered and broken because of social, economic, religious and political differences. Communities with extreme discord are likely to be poor supporters of the public schools. If the applicant discovers extreme and bitter factions which have attacked the schools or if he discovers a lack of support for the schools, he should think twice before accepting the position. Unless he is confident that he sees ways in which the community can be united in large degree in support of public enterprises such as the schools, he may be laying his head on the block by accepting the job.

Sometimes overlooked in examining the characteristics of the community is the reason why the vacancy exists--or if there really is a vacancy. Beginning superintendents sometimes unwittingly apply for a job when in reality it does not exist; or they apply for a vacancy that should not have occurred.

In his interviews and investigations prior to accepting the job, any wise applicant will try to determine the characteristics of the school board members--their backgrounds, purposes and motives, as well as the concepts they hold concerning their proper role and that of the superintendent. No wise beginner will buy a "pig in a poke" so far as the board of education is concerned. He should know board policies on budget-making, budget control, and purchasing. Policies covering personnel--their selection, promotion, assignments, salaries and staff-administrative and staff-board working relations--are also important to discuss and understand.

Good board members will welcome the candidate's investigation of them and their policies. A board that does not desire to have a candidate completely understand the ways in which it operates and what it expects of the schools and the superintendent is a board that thoughtful candidates will be glad to discover and avoid. Deciding on the superintendency is a two-way process.

FIRST DAYS ON THE JOB

The importance of getting off on the right foot with his immediate working associates, such as secretarial and bookkeeping personnel, can hardly be overestimated. People thought of as being "little people," when close to the point where major decisions are made, are "big people" if they perform their functions well. To be unacquainted with what they do or to underestimate the importance of their roles is to pave the way for costly errors and dissent.

As he gets acquainted, the new superintendent should make every effort to show his confidency in these immediate associates; but, not knowing their true potentials, he should observe carefully the character of their work, the personal qualities they possess, and the lines of allegiance they seem to have developed. Therefore, it is sometimes unwise to be too confidential or to encourage any one person to give impressions of the system, its personnel and its policies. Generally speaking, early conversations are most fruitful when concentrated on the work, purposes and plans of the individual participating.

Although changes in personnel at any level should be made slowly, the beginning superintendent needs desperately to have efficiency in his immediate office personnel.

Some officials may have enjoyed the privilege of power rightfully belonging to the head of the school system. Slow, cautious, considerate but determined efforts must be devoted to changing these positions into service positions rather than positions of control.

The forces in the community which have the greatest influence on the board of education and on the schools should be studied quietly and thoughtfully. Sometimes these forces are organizations or institutions, sometimes they are individuals, and sometimes they are the over-all concepts and mores of the total social structure. There is no one way to identify these forces, since they are often invisible. Nevertheless, the wise superintendent must be aware that they do exist and should be ever sensitive to the need for identifying them. Once identified, they should be respected but not feared.

No reading has greater priority than the minutes of school board meetings. Those of at least the preceding four years should be scanned with care. Also, annual reports of the former superintendent almost always give added and needed insights.

Early in his occupancy of the office, the superintendent should examine in detail the personnel records of his professional staff and the responsibilities which have been assigned to them. He will be able to avoid mistakes when dealing directly with his personnel only if he knows in considerable detail their qualifications and personal characteristics and the roles they have played. Of course, in a big school system it is difficult to master all this mass of data; therefore, the beginning superintendent must concentrate his attention on the leaders, such as staff specialists, principals, assistant principals and supervisors. A study of the professional and personal qualifications, special assignments, history and origins, and community leadership roles of his professional associates will provide helpful and illuminated bits of information to the superintendent.

Often overlooked but sometimes of great importance are the service personnel, such as custodians, janitors and maintenace people. They are important and the new superintendent must respect them and help them fill their rightful roles in the operation of the schools. Full recognition of the importance of their positions is no reason for letting them assume professional leadership responsibilities, however.

Since finance, budgeting, purchasing and sources of revenue loom large in the chief administrator's activities, the superintendent should hurriedly examine the financial records of the past several years:

-- Whence came the money--local, state and federal--and in what quantities?
-- What are the likely sources of increased revenues?
-- How were previous budgets developed and finally approved? Who participated in the processes?
-- Once approved, how and by whom was the budget controlled?
-- How was the budget distributed in terms of proportions for capital outlay, personnel, administration, supplies and maintenance?
-- Who purchased what and with whose approval?
-- How was the board of education kept informed of the status of the operating budget and at which intervals?
-- Are audits regular? If a recent audit has not been made, the superintendent is wise to advise the board to have one made at once.

Although little attempt at appraisal should be made immediately, there is no greater responsibility for the superintendent than to understand and develop the educational program. Since actions on budgets, personnel and facilities are in response to curriculum demands, the superintendent can waste no time in examining the school program from the kindergarten through the highest grade. Closely related to the curriculum are current instructional methods, organizational patterns, pupil personnel records, promotion and grading policies, and policies on discipline.

The superintendent should quickly get in mind a clear image of the housing, physical plants, equipment, and learning resources. Although a quick review of inventories will give much data, there is no substitute for first-hand visits to the physical plants from boiler room

to garret. Only in this way can the superintendent see glaring needs and the presence or absence of adequate maintenance. Incidentally, this sort of inspection gives him an opportunity to know and size up the maintenance and custodial personnel. The total fire insurance program should be examined, with careful attention given to the nature of policies the amount of coverage and the schedule for premium payments.

A review of resources may reveal some obvious deficiency which can be remedied immediately. Action proposed to the board, if based on thorough study and thoughtful presentation, could have long-term consequences favorable both to the superintendent's feelings about himself and to the board's feelings about him. Confidence in one's self and the board's confidence in the superintendent may find both their birth and their longevity in a problem met intelligently and successfully in the early days of service.

RELATIONS WITH SCHOOL BOARD

If, prior to his selection, the new superintendent has frankly and thoroughly discussed with the board the roles each should play and if the images each holds of the other are clearly understood and accepted, then the superintendent and board are likely to work together harmoniously and with a maximum of mutual understanding.

Although the school board should be dealt with as a whole, new board members may be given special attention as the superintendent tries to acquaint them with the diverse nature of pupils and the complex program which serves their needs. Consequently, the superintendent is justified in offering to conduct visiting tours for individual members of the board of education and in developing data and reports specifically to help new board members.

If you are a new superintendent, your chances for success and for effective leadership will be much better if you:

1. Have your own platform of values clearly defined.
2. Don't get too personally identified with a recommendation you are presenting for action.
3. Don't display any favoritism for individual board members--in public or private. Don't ever become personally obligated to a school board member.
4. Know the best in school administrative theory and practice.
5. Gain the confidence and respect of your professional staff.
6. Try to achieve a sense of security, even if you know very well your position is insecure.
7. Try to hold on to the values of the past, but try even harder to peer into and reach for the future.
8. Strive to help those school board members who have blind spots and predjudices.
9. Develop a sense of timing and make your recommendations when the time is right.
10. Keep the many segments of your community well informed on school problems, the school program and the schools' achievement so that they too can support sound proposals for school improvement. Good school boards welcome community expressions of support for school improvements. Bad school boards may be held on course by such community expression.
11. Establish a systematic plan for collecting and filing information about finance, facilities, staff, pupils, community, education programs and cultural trends.

THE FIRST BOARD MEETING

Since first impressions are important, it is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of a carefully planned agenda for the first school board meeting. Although no set pattern for an agenda has yet proved infallible, care in preparing it is a must.

It is good strategy to have on the last agenda items those proposals judged to be popular and thus likely to get unanimous support. If the board meeting close on a note of harmony, long run gains will be made.

For the new superintendent, it is the better part of wisdom to keep the action part of the agenda to the minimum essentials. Slow but steady progress may, in the end, be the fastest and most progress. At no point in his career should the superintendent be personally upset by school board decisions which are contrary to his recommendations. When he is a beginner, however, such adverse decisions are not only harder to accept but they are also more likely to leave an unfavorable impression which will influence the future actions of the board.

DEALING WITH ASSOCIATES

Unquestionably the most common cause of failure for the beginning superintendent is error in the area of human relations with his associates. People are sensitive; people are ambitious people have personal roles; people demand that they be respected. Consequently, the superintendent of schools should be a scholar in the field of human psychology and in the fundamental principles which bring about harmonious teamwork among those engaged in or interested in the enterprise of education.

Perhaps the following somewhat incomplete profile of the over-all behavioral pattern that should characterize the administrator's day-to-day operations is worthy of observation and emulation by the beginner.

The operation of a modern school system is a complicated affair, requiring participation by all professional personnel. In the larger school system, organizational structure requires a team of administrators or leaders with the superintendent as the chief executive--or sometimes chief supporter and coordinator. The successful superintendent serves as quarterback of the staff team. Sometimes he runs with the ball, sometimes he blocks for others, sometimes he fumbles. At other times he may be a line backer or a lone safety. His signals are usually called in "huddle," where his colleagues may question his judgment and where he can seek advice prior to action.

The superintendent is an influencer of actions and decisions by others. His personality, professional competence and devotion to education affect the behavior and attitudes of many others. Thus his leadership helps others to contribute to the educational enterprise, since it is others who actually do the thousands of specialized tasks in the educational effort. He gives encouragement to, opens doors for, and receives advice from his professional colleagues.

Above all, he finds ways to build morale of the staff. Since morale rests primarily on satisfaction derived from one's own work, the administrator's is ever centered on the professional successes and day-by-day achievements of his colleagues.

Since teaching is a profession, each classroom teacher and each subject specialist, as well as those designated with administrative titles, are leaders in their areas of the educational program. Wise superintendents will avoid trying to direct them authoritatively or dogmatically. Nor can the superintendent demand goals and standards which are inconsistent with their skills and purposes. Therefore, the administrator, particularly the man new on the job, should shun overt executive direction; rather, he should help, guide, lead and clear the way.

It may be advisable for the beginning superintendent to have a check list. The following could be included:

1. Remember that all people have personal traits and values peculiar to themselves.
2. Remember that when one delegates the right to assume responsibility, he also delegates the right to make mistakes.
3. Remember to support colleagues who are conscientiously performing their duties.

even when pressure from opposing forces is violent and powerful.

4. Remember to listen to others and respect their judgments.
5. Remember to explain to the staff early in the year that no revolution is pending.
6. Remember to encourage experimentation.
7. Remember that the teacher's task is exceedingly complex and difficult.
8. Remember that teachers differ as much as children differ and that recognizing the principle of individual differences among professional colleagues is as important as recognizing it when dealing with children.
9. Remember to recognize outstanding achievement and to give credit where credit is due.
10. Remember that every member of the staff, every member of the board, every child in the school, every patron of the school, is a person in many respects like you. As such, each one has a deep-seated desire to be recognized for some worthy accomplishment, to be secure against needless humiliation and to maintain a sense of self-respect and human dignity.
11. Remember that in dealing with difficult personnel problems, the superintendent can afford to assure the teacher's personal security even to the extent of having the discussion take place in the teacher's room rather than in the superintendent's office.
12. Remember that dogmatic pronouncements are generally vulnerable and give the appearance of an authority to be feared rather than respected.
13. Remember, when addressing the faculty on the first occasion, to do so as a searcher after truth rather than as one who has already found it. The address should be short and complimentary to the roles the total staff play in the enterprise.
14. Remember that most school systems have patterns of power strucutres and patterns of leadership. Early conflict with these should be avoided; rather, ways should be sought to utilize them for the good of the schools.
15. Remember that, as is true with any group, there are those who ride hobbies and have deep prejudices on what the schools should do. Beware of committing support to them prior to a comprehensive understanding.
16. Remember that each colleague can teach you something of value and that the mere seeking of their help flatters and extends their stature.
17. Remember that often other members of the professional staff can make a better speech than you on many subjects; when they are used as a substitute, not only is the superintendent relieved for more important duties but the staff members grow in stature.
18. Remember to make sure that careful minutes of school board meetings are kept and promptly recorded.
19. Remember that the PTA may be the most consistent and stalwart teammate for better schools
20. Remember that at the opening of each school year the safety and health of children and staff are a first consideration. Transportation and street safety, playground precautions and supervision, the total insurance program, rules and procedures for fire safety, civil defense measures, emergency school closings, health examinations for pupils and staff, communicable disease control--neglect of these details may result in anxious moments in the future.
21. Remember to review the school calendar.
22. Remember that good taste and good judgment dictate that the new superintendent resist all temptations to make uncomplimentary remarks about his predecessor.
23. Remember that close social or business association with individual board members is ill-advised.
24. Remember not to become involved in intimate social activities with selected members of the staff. Such associations almost always are interpreted by other associates as special privileges.
25. Remember that older and able superintendents in the immediate region should

be consulted on many different problems and issues.

26. Remember that your education is incomplete. Plan carefully so that you have time, opportunity and resources to read publications of depth, including recent findings of research, and to engage in workshops, study groups and professional meetings.
27. Remember not to make uncomplimentary remarks in public about any member of the staff.
28. Remember not to be too hasty in joining civic clubs or social organizations--know the lay of the land before stepping.
29. Remember to beware of accepting gifts from vendors, board members or staff members.
30. Remember not to overlook resources in nearby colleges and universities.
31. Remember not to become involved in power politics.
32. Remember not to write testimonials for commercial products.
33. Remember to transmit confidential information only through trusted staff members.
34. Remember not to make promises unless you are fully confident you can keep them.
35. Remember to work closely with local police and juvenile courts so that children and youth involved in minor difficulties are protected from injustice and undue public censure.

JUDICIOUS OBSERVATIONS

The superintendent of schools, particularly the beginning superintendent, is often turned to for opinions on all sorts of educational matters. The range is extensive and diverse. He is expected to respond quickly to almost everything that is said or done, has been said or done, and is proposed to be done. He is expected to know and judge the observations of men from Socrates to Silberman. He is expected to have careful evaluations of every significant book and magazine article relating to public schools coming off the contemporary press. To be reasonably adequate for such expectations calls for anticipatory planning and wise judgment.

He might find it helpful to:

1. Do some soul searching and recapitulation of his thinking on the fundamental philosophical bases for a democratic society and for the public educational system established to maintain and develop that society.
2. Crystallize his knowledge of Western civilization's traditions, with special emphasis on the cultural evolution in the United States.
3. Re-examine his knowledge of how children and adults grow, change and learn.
4. Summarize his knowledge of why men do what they do and why and how free institutions operate.

From these knowledges and understandings, he should develop a pattern of beliefs and set of principles which he can follow with considerable consistency. Thus his values become clear and will serve as a basis for wide observations on many questions.

Although his reading of contemporary materials should be wide, he should not conclude that it is more important to read Rickover, Bestor and Freeman than to re-read Shakespeare, Plato and Jefferson. Possibly capable associates are willing to form a team to scan and carefully evaluate contemporary published materials--books, bulletins, other publications and films. By sharing these analyses, the whole staff is in better position to discuss intelligently the day-to-day publications and films.

The wise superintendent is seldom badgered into controversy over labels such as "progressive education," "home and family living," or "basic education."

LAWS AND STATE REGULATIONS

The inexperienced superintendent can avoid many mistakes by contacting officials of the

county and of the state department of education in order to understand the relationships that exist between them and the local community. Such first-hand contacts win him friends--friends who can be of great help. At the same time he can learn about the regulations and laws which affect the educational program, whether in the area of finance, required reports or general laws. He can also learn what services are available.

The school code should be at his elbow at all times, and its contents should be known to him. However, important as the law may be, the superintendent should never use it as a crutch now allow himself to become a mere slave to it. Laws, too, need interpretation and change.

Re-reading many sections of the code often brings clearer insights. Also, old and pending federal legislation--which may mean money in the budget if understood properly--is a body of knowledge that he must master.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Since the schools are the people's own work, as Henry Barnard expressed it, the public has a vital concern in them and must be kept informed of achievements and needs. Although the child who is a satisfied customer is probably the most potent avenue for good public relations with adults, the superintendent and his staff should plan the ways and means by which educational matters may best be presented to all of the people. Naturally, press and radio and telvision loom large in this matter.

Careful consideration should be given to the thin line that exists between informing the public of favorable achievements and explaining realistically the serious defects and urgent needs. The superintendent cannot with impunity describe the schools as being superior in all ways and at the same time make an urgent appeal for money to correct glaring defects. A superintendent desiring to contradict ciriticism or to just "sell" the schools to the public may paint such a rosy picture that the public may fail to listen when he appeals for a bigger budget to improve the program.

Early in his administration, the beginning superintendent should call on the newspaper editors and reports and on the program directors of other mass media. He should give them the facts frankly on all educational matters and should encourage them to observe the schools and their products. He should assume that these leaders in mass media are concerned with the welfare of children and will do honest reporting. Until he finds that this is not true, the superintendent should express confidence in them and should be frank on all matters.

Public relations is often a man-to-man affair. The superintendent cannot afford to refuse to talk to clients of the schools, either over the telephone, in his office or on the street. Above all else the superintendent should fear appearing to be exclusive and difficult to see.

The superintendent himself, however, can do much to relieve the pressure on his time by seeing people but quickly pointing out that there are others in the school system who are better able to give answers and have more information than he has. Thus the tracks that first come to his door may later lead to a principal's office, to a teacher, or to another staff member. Tracks leading to many members of the staff indicate greater leadership and stronger administration on the part of the superintendent. This process also increases the stature of the superinterdent's associates and their willingness to assume responsibility.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

The superintendent can ecsily overlook the importance of being directly related to the student body. A superintendent's strength and influence in a community are often related in direct proportion to the impressions pupils have of him. If he has been seen by them as a friend, working in their interests; if he has joined them in working and thinking; if he has

appeared at student performances, such as athletic events, debating contests and musical and dramatic events; if his image in the minds of pupils is that of a dynamic person rather than just a name, support is engendered.

The image of the superintendent held by the school population is the image that is transmitted to parents and many others. Thus the image held by Johnny and Mary is the image likely to be held by the majority of the citizenry.

RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF

The beginning superintendent should remember to live and schedule his activities so that there is time for self-appriasal, self-satisfactions, deep-seated personal joys, reasonable family life and the thrill of personal fulfillment. Mental, social, emotional and spiritual equilibrium is an essential quality of the good school administrator. One is most loving and generous to his fellowman, one is most sound in judgment, one is most honest, when his own physical health, soul and spirit have found full fruition. Sound physical health is one of the administrator's most desired characteristics. Without it, all other qualifications are so adversely affected that successful administration is difficult, if not impossible. The school administrator has an obligation to guard his strength, his emotional balance and his good health. He owes this not only to himself but to his staff, the pupils and the citizens of the community he serves.

HOME & FAMILY

The home life and the role the family plays in the community are of considerable importance. The wife in particular can make or break the superintendent of schools. She is in more danger of doing harm by playing too many roles in the community than too few.

Of course she must make public appearances and she must answer the telephone. Calmness, good judgment, modesty and good taste are qualities she should cultivate. She should not be the spokesman for the school officials, including her husband. Often her ignorance of school board decisions, official administrative policies and difficult school problems protects her from those who seek "inside" information. She should make reasonable public appearances when she is needed to support her husband, but there is little place for her in and about the office.

The place of residence is a matter of judgment. Certainly the superintendent of schools has a role in the community that demands that he live in a respectable area and in a reasonably attractive house. Reasonable observance of the community's customs, mores and behavior patterns may sometimes seem irritating, but this is the price to be paid for school leadership. It seems inevitable that the superintendent's work schedule cannot observe union hours, but the wise superintendent will not fail to reserve some time for his family.

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